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THE BODY OF CHRIST

A

DISCOURSE

DELIVERED IN THE

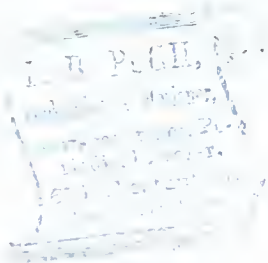
FIRST CONGREGATIONAL UNITARIAN CHURCH

SUNDAY APRIL 17 1859

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C. Sherman & Son,

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SUNDAY APRIL 17 1859

BY

W. H. FURNESS

MINISTER

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# DISCOURSE

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EPII. I. 22-23.

THE CHURCH, WHICH IS HIS BODY.

THIS is a favorite mode of expression with the Apostle Paul. He frequently calls the Church, that is, the society of the disciples of Christ, the body of Christ. And by this way of speaking, I understand him as saying that the associated friends of Christ bear to Christ the same relation that the body bears to the head or to the mind; that Christ is to his friends what the soul is to the body: the life, the animating spirit.

I think, friends, this is a very striking, and a very instructive representation. But in order clearly to perceive its force and its beauty, it must be observed what a very different idea Paul had of Christ from that which has been entertained since his time. The very suggestion of such a relation (the relation of the body and the head or soul) between Christ and the company of Chris-

tian believers, shows that to Paul, Christ was not what he is now to most people, a mere name, synonymous, indeed, with the very highest names, but still only a dead name, significant of no magical, scarcely of any intelligible, idea. It is very clear, to my thinking, that in the mind and upon the lips of Paul, this word Christ did not stand for any metaphysical conception of the nature of the person whom it designates, nor for any theological dogma respecting his office; but it was the sign or name of a new moral power that had come into the world, a spiritual force, a life-giving principle, with which the Apostle's soul was in a glow all the time. In one passage, Paul speaks of Christ as 'the power of God, and the wisdom of God;' that is, as Divine power and Divine wisdom. And this not in any mystical sense, but in a manner perfectly natural and intelligible.

In the personal life of the Man of Nazareth, luminous in its wonderful simplicity and greatness, Love and Wisdom were manifested truly divine. The Apostle felt the force of that great Life. It wrought upon him so powerfully, it moved him so deeply, it awoke all the energies of his being into such vigorous and victorious action, expanding his sympathies, enlightening his understanding, introducing him, in fine, into such a new world, into such a new life, that the name of Christ came, in his estimation, to stand for all that was sacred and divine. That one name represented to him whatever

was inspiring in Truth, touching in Love, and grand in Power. He knew, from the effect which had been produced upon his own mind and heart, that it must stir every human soul in like manner, when once the truth and majesty of that life came to be fully discerned. He could not keep to himself what he had received. He was impelled by an irresistible impulse to go abroad, and communicate the strength and the joy that came to him through the reverence with which Christ had inspired him, to his fellow-men, even at the constant peril of his life. And wherever he went, although he was misunderstood, and ridiculed, and opposed, he succeeded in imparting to some others something, more or less, of his own holy and generous enthusiasm. In all the principal cities which he visited, he gathered little associations of individuals in sympathy with himself in his reverence for Christ. These companies of Christian disciples, scattered over the Roman Empire, in Rome, Corinth, Ephesus, and various other places, were severally few in number, and composed, for the most part, of persons of very humble condition, poor people and slaves. Although each society was small, yet all these societies formed one Association, bound together at the first by no formal rules, but only by a strong common faith and a lively sympathy, and thus constituting what the Apostle calls the Church, the CHURCH, a word of very simple meaning, signifying the

Congregation, or more literally, the Convocation, a number of individuals called together in one.

Now, my friends, is it not apparent with what perfect propriety Paul called the Church THE BODY OF CHRIST? There is no extravagance, no mysticism, in this representation. Was not Christ the central and animating idea of the activity of the Apostles, and through them of the whole primitive Association of Christian confessors? The visible Church owed its very existence to Christ. It sprang from him, through the influence of his personal life acting upon the Apostle, just as the body grows out from the spirit, and receives its life and energy from that; just as every visible organism, every plant,—flower, or tree,—takes its distinctive form and qualities not by chance, but from an inscrutable, immaterial agency, from a vital idea, by which, and in accordance with which, it is fashioned.

Thus it was, that the primitive Church was a natural and necessary growth. It was a body taking existence and shape from the personal character of Christ. It lay in the very nature of things, that when such an one as he appeared, so full of power to move human hearts, just such a result should be manifested as did actually follow. First one, then another, and yet another, would be impressed and won by him; and the persons thus attracted to him, would be drawn together by sympathy in a common object, and would gather round the idea



of Christ, just as the body gathers round the spirit from which it springs, by which it lives, and the will or laws of which it executes.

Thus, and so long as the Church sprang from Christ, as its active and creative centre, so long as the personal influence of Christ wrought to melt human hearts, and cause them to flow together in veneration and love for him, and to flow out in a beneficent activity like his, so long the Christian Church was a Divine Institution, and the Holy Spirit of God wrought in it, and wrought through it, just as it works in and through every natural thing ; just as it is working now through the light and the air, and the reviving vegetation of the year.

And furthermore, as the first Christian Association was the divinely created Body of Christ, so it was not a dead body, but a living body, penetrated and animated by the spirit of his self-sacrificing faith, and of his active humanity. So that the indwelling spirit of Christ continually manifested its strength and beauty, in the different members of his body, in the courage with which they endured every peril to which their integrity was exposed, and in the tenderness of their affections ; and his visible body was a lively picture of him.

And it was because his Body, the Church, was so largely imbued with his life, that it grew so rapidly, although in the midst of fire and blood. It was a living power in the world, creating new thoughts in men's

minds, new affections in human hearts, making people a surprise to themselves, in the new strength to do and to endure, of which they were rendered conscious. So all alive with the love of Christ was that primitive body of his, that people said: "See how these Christians love one another!" And the populace in the great Roman and Grecian cities were filled with such admiration of the bravery of old men and tender maidens, in encountering death by fire or by wild beasts, that every public execution of those noble martyrs only multiplied by hundreds the company of Christians, and caused the living body of Christ to grow and expand into dimensions of increasing greatness.

But soon the Church grew so strong in numbers, and in the rank and position of its members, enrolling high officers of State and Emperors among them, that many were drawn to it not by reverence for Christ, not by his spirit working in their hearts and attracting them to him through a host of dangers, but by selfish considerations, motives of gain and personal ambition; not because they wished to serve others, but because they wished directly the opposite: to rule them. Others again were found in the Church, ostensibly members of the Body of Christ, not through any lively interest in him, but from the accident of birth, or by force of outward circumstances.

And so, in course of time, it came to pass that the

body of Christ, which, when clad in the coarse garments of a poor slave, and girt all round with the fires of persecution, showed such Divine life, such angelic beauty, was soon arrayed in imperial purple, and seated on a throne, and in this garb, although still named the body of Christ, it lost the spirit of Christ, and a worldly spirit taking possession of its members, made them labor, not to promote human liberty and progress, but to oppose and crush both. Then the Christian Church, no longer the divine embodiment of the free and self-sacrificing mind of Christ, became the pliant slave of despotic power, ready to brand every free thought as impious, to bind men hand and foot in the heavy chains of a heartless formality, and to overwhelm them with the terrors both of this world and of the world to come.

To all the purposes of human degradation and enslavement, it proved itself still to be, although no longer the body of Christ, yet a living body, a body full of gigantic strength, striding over the world, upholding with its single arm the whole fabric of despotism, listening with an ear so acute, watching with an eye so sharp, that men trembled and whispered in the most hidden places of their own dwellings for fear of this terrible power.

But while thus alive and strong, truly a living and muscular body to serve the lust of power, to every

generous instinct of humanity, to every free and genial aspiration after Truth and a likeness to Christ and to God, it has been as dead as if it were all made of wood or iron; and the Religion, to which it has ministered, to which it has given this sacred name,—what has it been but a bigoted zeal for opinions and outward observances, for forms of speculative thought and external worship?

So tremendously powerful has been its influence in this direction, in corrupting the very idea of Religion in men's minds, in wrenching away the human conscience from Justice and the Love of God, and in fastening it upon formal prayers and days and places, that to breathe a word in a Christian assembly, on a Christian Sabbath, in condemnation of the wickedness of buying, selling, and hunting human beings, is considered by thousands the worse sin of the two, a downright act of sacrilege!

Thus mournfully is the Body of Christ, the Church, once instinct at every pore with the life of his glorious humanity—thus is it forsaken of his spirit, and possessed by the spirit of the world and of the Devil. It still bears the name of Christ. It boasts loudly of that, and its different members, the different Churches, into which the one great Church is split, contend fiercely, each for its sole claim to that honorable title; or they cease from their bitter controversies only when some free

thought is to be suppressed, or some barbarous enactment is to be sanctioned. The Church makes a great show with the multitude and costliness of its temples. It collects thousands of dollars every day to print Bibles and tracts—to circulate the dead letter that kills. It keeps a large place in the public eye, and makes a great noise in the public ear; but the smoke of human torment is forever ascending, and men lie grovelling and writhing in their iniquities and their chains. Think you, my hearers, we should witness such sights of guilt and woe as the world continually presents if the Christian Church were what it claims to be, the body, the living and strong Body of Christ, the natural and heaven-created organ, whereby his most Holy Spirit would act with power upon the souls of men, reclaiming or overawing the guilty, lifting up the fallen, guiding the weak, righting the wronged, impregnating the very air that we breathe with sanctity, and so elevating public opinion above all our hollow conventionalities, above all our barbarous laws and inhuman prejudices, that such legal violations of human rights as we have recently witnessed could not possibly be?

But while the so-called Christian Church has ceased to be the living body of Christ, animated by his spirit, and executing his will, he is not wholly without influence. His great life is still embodied in the world. It is forever forming for itself a new body, as the old

body decays and loses the inspiration of his Truth. The once true and living Church is now but a corpse, decked in costly array for the grave. Within the Church, and, more strictly still, outside of the Church, the rudiments of a new growth are more or less distinctly visible. And just as our material bodies are continually changed and superseded by a new formation, so the life of Christ is constantly fashioning for itself a new and more glorious body, a body fuller of life and stronger, of a more vigorous constitution, and of greater grace and beauty. And the members of this new and more powerful body, may have no name to be honored in the established Churches of the day. They may be disowned and reviled as the enemies of Christ, infidels, and fanatics. And yet the very life-blood of Christian truth and liberty is warming their hearts, and giving them such power, that they are the strong hands and the swift feet of the body of Christ, his hands to lift up the bowed-down, his feet to run upon the errands of his mercy, and he looks out from their eyes suffused with heavenly pity, and his voice lends its music to their accents.

Amidst all the darkness and corruption that are in the world, and although men are divided into unnumbered parties and sects, yet here and there the marks and signs of the true Church, the living Body of Christ, are beginning to be seen. I look for them not in the expensive structures of marble and of granite that stud



the land, pointing their pinnacles to the skies, not in the articles of faith which men profess to hold, not in the revivals and prayer meetings which make so much noise, not in any of the loud-voiced demonstrations which are made of religious zeal. ‘The kingdom of God,’ saith Christ, ‘cometh not with observation.’ So the Body of Christ, his divinely instituted Church, grows in silence and in secrecy. It is growing often when and where it is least looked for. A germ of its growth exists in every free thought fearlessly uttered in the love of truth, in every act that sacrifices popularity and success for the sake of truth and honesty, in every word spoken for the Right when the Wrong is mighty and terrible, in every office of humanity, be it only the giving of a cup of cold water to a fugitive slave.

I looked, the other day, into that low, dark, and crowded room, in which one of the most wicked laws that man ever enacted was in process of execution, and there I beheld the living presence of that spirit of Christ, out of which shall again grow the beautiful Body of Christ, the true Church. The close and heated atmosphere of the place well became the devilish work that was going on. The question was, whether, for no crime, but for the color of the skin which God gave him, a fellow-man should be robbed of his dear liberty, and degraded to a chattel and a brute. There sat the man in his old hat and red flannel shirt and ragged coat,

just as he was seized by this horrible despotism. There he sat while questions were discussed involving things dearer to him than life. On one side of him stood the minister of the cruel law. On the other,—the place was luminous to my inmost soul with a celestial light; for there stood a devoted Christian woman, blind to all outward distinctions and defacements, deaf to the idle babble of the world's tongues, cheering her poor hunted brother with the sisterly sympathy of her silent presence. And as I looked upon her, I felt that Christ was there; that no visible halo of sanctity was needed to distinguish that simple act of humanity, done under such circumstances as an act pre-eminently Christian, profoundly sacred, ineffably religious.

My friends, rely upon it, as you live, these are the things which are the germs out of which shall grow a new Body of Christ. There may be ridicule and contempt, and indifference, and loud charges of folly and fanaticism; but nevertheless it is such acts as this, done in unconscious simplicity and tenderness of heart, that go straight to the very centre and soul of the people, and help us all to see what an artificial, childish gewgaw that religion is in comparison, which busies itself with church-going and formal acts of prayer, putting the dead letter for the living spirit. Yes, though we may be hedged round and round with all manner of narrow prejudices, such a touch of natural humanity as this goes like an electric flash through



all our encasements and bandages, and creates in us a new and larger sentiment of Truth and Religion.

We may not, through any one experience of this sort, be made conscious of any sudden and great change in our habits of thinking. But still every experience of the kind, everything that appeals to our common human feelings, has an effect, and gradually and insensibly our whole view of things undergoes a change. It is interesting to observe how men outgrow their narrow creeds when their hearts begin to expand with a broader sentiment of humanity. This is one of the blessed effects of the Anti-slavery movement. Whenever it enlists orthodox men in its behalf, it instantly begins to liberalize their orthodoxy. They very soon discover that there is something a great deal better and more living than their theology; that the dogmas of the sects are dry husks which the swine eat, yielding not a drop of refreshment in comparison with the great, world-regenerating principles of Justice and Mercy, which, under the pressure of persecution, burst out with exhilarating power, like the wine-press with new wine. Thus it is that true Christianity undermines and displaces false religion. Thus it is that the cause of the Fugitive Slave is the cause of Christ. And every triumph of personal freedom is a victory gained over the despotism of a corrupt and soul-enslaving theology.

Thus it is that the spirit of Christ, which is one and

the same with a spirit of self-renouncing humanity, is steadily working to form for itself a new Church, a new body, a new and more elevated form of thought, and to realize in the characters of individuals, and in the institutions of society a higher idea of Truth and Goodness.

And we are all witnesses, my friends, of this steady forming or reforming process. The members of Christ's body, fashioned and beautified by his indwelling grace, are beginning to be recognized. The recent Fugitive Slave case has revealed a change in the general feeling of this community, which is striking and most encouraging. Everywhere, during the course of the trial, in the streets and places of public resort, the tone of the public mind, as it was indicated in the talk of men, was in cheering accord with Freedom and Humanity. It was rare to hear any concern expressed for the Union, or the Constitution. And it seems as if it were beginning at last to be perceived that there is no danger to be feared where Liberty is revered and Justice done, even though human enactments, hostile to both, be trampled in the dust. I see in this change a sign and evidence of the growing body of Christ, of the appearance of the true and living Church, that Church which will not lie like a huge and decaying corpse across the path of human progress, neither moving itself, nor permitting this busy generation to

advance towards light and liberty ; that glorious Church, whose strong limbs are the men and the women who suffer with joy for the Right ; that body of Christ, that stands erect and free, with arms outstretched in everlasting mercy, or runs forward and leads the way to truth and to heaven, levelling the mountains of human pride, exalting the valleys of human ignorance.

Precisely, my friends, precisely as the Church, which is the body of Christ, grew in the primitive ages of the Christian era, so is it growing now, not by the instrumentality of learning or of books, not by argument and reasoning, but by every event that touches the hearts of people and awakens in them sentiments of pity, of admiration, and of love, everything that stirs the natural human sympathies of men and makes us feel for one another. We associate all our ideas of the Christian Church and of Religion mainly with human institutions, with the forms of religion which men have established. But God, the Almighty, the Omnipresent, works not in the narrow ways of men. His Spirit is abroad over the whole earth, and at times and in places where we look not for it, far away from all that we think holy and religious, that blessed power is at work forming the Body of Christ, making it the living organ of his will, that it may carry out that will, notwithstanding all the obstacles that man, in his wickedness or ignorance, is constantly heaping

up in its way. O friends, I adjure you, take heed, lest you be found resisting that life-giving Spirit. Take heed that you be not led astray by names and phrases, mistaking the form of godliness for the power thereof. That our understandings may be enlightened, that we may be living parts of the body of Christ, let us pray now, in our inmost hearts with an earnestness that no words can express!